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ABSTRACT

Public criticism of the quality of education implies that teachers need a legal mandate to teach students to read and write. But while teachers may sometimes forget that transmitting knowledge of the English language is their most important function and that every child has the right to learn the language regardless of preconceived notions, legislative mandate is not enough. The following steps, if implemented with consistency and enthusiasm, will help educators improve language arts education, giving students fundamental skills in English and helping them find meaning through language: language arts teachers should (1) develop good curriculum and teaching guides; (2) develop better language skills evaluation programs; (3) use the intensive-immersion model for teaching language; (4) demand excellence of student performance; (5) work through professional organizations to reduce class size; (6) elect legislators supportive of education and keep them informed of educational efforts; (7) continue quality inservice teacher education; (8) negotiate professional development for teachers as part of the contract benefit package; (9) support professional organizations; (10) require excellence of teacher education programs; (11) demand excellence of remedial programs or, better still, keep remedial instruction in the regular classroom; and (12) use the Socratic questioning method of teaching. (HTH)

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We Must Make All Students Literate

V. Pauline Hodges
William H. Johnson

Every day headlines in newspapers, news magazines, and professional journals announce that test scores are declining and that teachers themselves are incompetent. A recent national poll result revealed that only 34% of the public think that teachers are, in fact, teaching anything.

Teacher malpractice suits are on the rise. Parents and students are demanding greater responsibility from teachers and schools.

Inferior education for minorities is to be the target of suits by the Reagan administration. National assessment scores for inferential reading skills for 17 year olds show decline in spite of the improved literal comprehension scores of 9 year olds.

If we are honest about our profession and about ourselves, we have to admit there is much truth in the headlines,--that we haven't done a very good job of teaching, especially in the area of language.

When teacher education programs are forced by state legislators to implement competency tests in language and math, we have to admit that the problem has been around for a long time or these prospective new teachers would have these skills.

All of this criticism implies that we language teachers need a legal mandate in order to do our job. There is the implication that we must face the fact that by law we are liable for malpractice and misrepresentation when we produce any students who do not speak, read and write the English language. But this is not only a legal problem. It is a moral one. It is that we have forgotten or never knew what we are certified to teach--and that is the English language to all students. We have forgotten that the reason we majored in

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something called English was that we loved language expressed in literature and that we liked to write--or thought we would. We were excited about sharing our love of language with others. Somewhere in the everyday hassles of reluctant learners, cafeteria duty, faculty meetings, grading 130 papers, and having 35 kids in a class, we forgot about our loving language and lost our excitement about teaching it.

We did not suddenly one morning say, "Today I'm going to be a bad teacher." We did not say, "But I no longer love the language, or like kids, or want them to learn." No true teacher ever consciously decides not to teach kids if they remain in the classroom. It is just that we forgot that transmitting the knowledge of our language will always be the most important function of education. We forgot that without language there is no means available for learning anything else--that language is the basis of all learning.

We also forgot that every child has the right to learn the language regardless of the label we have attached to him or her. No matter if that student has been called L.D., emotionally disturbed, linguistically different--or reading disabled, it is our legal obligation to teach that student language--but even more important than the legal mandate is the moral responsibility to realize these students need language most of all. Speaking of all students, but certainly including these special ones, Madeline Hunter says there are four "for-sures" in the student's future...and if she is right, then language is a must in the "for-sures" she lists. They are

1. The human body will remain the same but we can learn to control part of it either physiologically, emotionally, socially, or intellectually. Certainly language is a part of three of these areas.

2. Television will be with us. If that is true, then we must use our language classes to help students view television critically and treat it as a form of literature. We need to be training our students in language so they will have a chance to enter the television field as a means of employment...and without language development, that will be impossible.
3. Computers are with us. We sometimes think that math is the requirement for computer technology...it is, but so is language. We must help students refine their language skills so they will be ready to enter the world of advance technology and computer language.
4. Humans will have more leisure time. Certainly development of not only the English language but several others can make this leisure time one of quality...so that the human can read better, write creatively, think logically, and enjoy the humanities.

We English teachers have no way of knowing what will be required of our students fifteen or twenty years from now as far as technical knowledge is concerned as it is advancing so rapidly that tomorrow we will be outdated...but the gift of language is a gift to last a life-time...for it is the basis for all other subjects and the means to achieve both professionally and personally. I recently taught a class in basic grammar (by that I mean what we should be teaching in grades 5 to 9) as well as simple writing skills for memorandum, letters, and instructions to a class of shop foremen for a high corporation. These people told me that when they should have been learning these skills, their teachers did not think they were "college material" and because they were minorities or because they wanted to work in a vocational trade, they would not

need to develop a knowledge of writing the language. All are high school graduates. All were required by the company to take the class so they can adequately perform their jobs. If the English teachers of these foremen had had any foresight for the job requirements of the future, they would have taught basic language skills to all their students whether the students thought they would ever need them or not. When do we always let kids judge what is best for themselves?

And no matter that we have taught the basic skills to most of our students--if we haven't demanded excellence in the language and insisted that students read their highest potential rather than to rise to a level of mediocrity--we have not met our moral responsibility.

Perhaps we need to look at what language is, to examine or re-examine our reasons for teaching language or for "saying that we do" anyway. If we take time to examine our beliefs about language, we will know what we have to do:

1. "Language is a learned oral system of arbitrary symbols used for communication among human beings." There are two parts to this belief which makes it imperative to teach every student regardless of his/her level of proficiency upon entering our class-first, that is language is learned and can be learned by all students. In my 32 years of teaching over 25,400 students have sat in my reading, writing, or English classes--and only one I could not teach to read--only 5 I could not teach to spell well.

   The second key word of the first definition is the word "communication." Mike, a former student of mine years ago is a good example of teaching communication skills to in spite of his

handicap. Mike suffered a birth injury which made learning to write or read virtually impossible, but he could memorize anything he ever heard. He could analyze a national news report with amazing analytical ability. I always chose him for Four-H talks or for the lead in the school plays, because he was a fantastic speaker and never needed a prompter. Today he is a successful farmer...and the bank has no trouble taking his checks no matter how his name is spelled...it would have been easy to have given up on Mike when I had him in 5th grade...or later when I had him in junior high, and finally when he was in my high school classes. But he had the right to learn to communicate...and he is one student I could not teach to read, one of the five I couldn't teach to spell...but he could learn to communicate and to understand the language in spite of his handicap.

Lack of communication skills is the reason for breakdown of marriage, for students with criminal records, for joblessness in many cases. When I taught 33 kids on probation in Kansas, I was faced with the fact that none of them wrote above the third grade level and not one read about the fifth grade level...although they were ranging in ages from 15 to 19. Those kids changed my life because they made me aware that we as English teachers have to do a better job...when I lived in a classroom with them all day and shared them only with the math teacher, I knew their real handicap was a lack of language skills...and I marveled at the rise in self-concept as their reading/writing skills improved. They found out they could learn, that they weren't stupid as they had believed before.

2. The second belief about language is that "it is arbitrary since langu-

age reflects the experiences and culture of its speakers." This aspect of language presents us with a double challenge--to help linguistically and culturally different children learn standard English for business and economic reasons while at the same time we help them maintain a respect for their own language and culture, rather than making them lose that respect.

One "cop-out" we have used for not teaching standard English is that we will destroy the orginal culture--this will not happen by just learning another language. Those of us who know more than one know that. It will happen if we do not help the student retain that respect and if we don't help him or her realize the advantage of knowing more than one language.

3. The third belief about language is that "a child is born with the innate ability to learn language but he is not born with a particular predisposition toward learning one language over another."

This knowledge of how language is acquired gives a lie to our cop-outs for teaching linguistically different when we say he "can't" learn English. Of course he can if he is taught, given the chance to use and practice it. In fact, he could learn several languages simultaneously if necessary as attested by children in other countries who do so.

Only in America do we expect a child to learn one language, and that one not very well. We know economically that he should learn two or three--and yet if it is hard to teach, we don't do it. Of course, we as native English speakers have more trouble with some languages than others because the sound systems are different, but that doesn't mean

we can't learn them. Each person's speech is somewhat different from every other English speaker. Each person's language is his very own. And that is true of all students, culturally or linguistically different or not.

4. The fourth belief about language is that "it is oral and that writing is only an attempt to approximate a particular language graphically." No culture ever developed a writing system without first developing a language to be recorded by that system. As teachers, we must remember that writing must be learned by 1) learning the structure of the language (grammar), and 2) by practicing writing. We must teach both reading and writing as an outgrowth of speech--related to the way we use oral language.

   We must remember that not even the gifted are born reading or writing--that we must teach all students how to use these aspects of language. We must also remember that writing is the most difficult to learn of the aspects of language because of the cognitive requirements required along with physical skills of handwriting.

5. Fifth, "language is symbolic." Because language is symbolic, it is more difficult to teach than some other subjects. Because it calls for abstract levels of cognition, it is even more difficult for children at different stages of cognitive development.

   We expect students to learn math--a symbolic language--and fail to teach these same students grammar, the very structure of the language because of the "cop-out" excuse that it is too hard for students to learn. At the same time that math teacher down the hall expects these students to learn abstractions with excellence. Some of students we label remedial can learn multiplication tables and yet we say they can't learn

the principle parts of verbs or conjugation. Our other cop-out is that grammar is boring for students to learn. Did a math teacher ever ask you if you enjoyed learning multiplication tables or formulas? Students, of course, can learn what we expect them to.

How Can We Teach All Children Beyond the Basic Skills?

We must teach our students that language is not sufficient unto itself...it takes the speaker and the listener to make meaning--just as it takes the writer and the reader to get meaning from print. We must in Jerome Bruner's words "go beyond the information given."

If this is so, then one of the biggest indictments against us as English teachers is that we do not teach the "inferential" reading skills to all students as the National Assessment shows. The back to basics movement has made us cognizant of the "mechancis" of language but has not impressed us with the fact that students use language for thinking--and that our levels of language limit our thinking. We must help our students use symbolic language to think logically, abstractly, creatively, and analytically as the result of reading, writing, speaking and listening. We must teach them to read great literature, to express their own ideas in effective speech and concise writing. We must help our students realize that man does not speak because he thinks...he thinks because he speaks--because he has access to language.

Language is a key to our students' cognitive development. It is also a means of our students' expression of their own moral development as human beings. If this is so, then we must help students realize as they read ever increasingly abstract materials that the writer's morality does not lie in the subject he writes about or the arguments he sets forth, but in his behavior toward language (i.e., what he does with language to persuade his reader).

Even our most remedial students can be taught to think at higher levels given the language--the tools to do so. I found as a teacher of remedial readers that thinking skills improved with reading skill improvement--and with much oral discussion of controversial ideas in the books they read. We forget that great ideas can be found in books students can read--and the more they read, the better they read and the more difficult the books and ideas they can deal with.

We must help students--all our students become infected as we are with the beauty of language--to find joy in hearing us read the 1st chapter of The Grapes of Wrath in its imagery and uncomplicated language. They need to hear us read the great poetry, from Sarte and Shakespeare, and from Kantzantzakis and Castenada.

We do not have any students who are not searching for meaning in their own lives. We can use leanguage to help them find it. We can use the great ideas expressed in language to help them see that others have suffered and searched and ultimately found truth for themselves. They are not alone in their search...what student can we touch with Thomas Wolfe's lines...

> "Which of us has known his brother?
> Which of has looked into his father's heart?
> Which of has not remained forever prison-pent?
> Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?"

I remember tears in the eyes of a junior boy in my class years ago as I read Thornton Wilder's..."Good bye to clocks ticking, and sleeping and waking up... Oh, earth, you're too beautiful...do people realize you every, every minute?" Or the girl who stopped by my desk to say thank you for today after I had read Octavio Paz's...

> "To see with our ears, to feel with our minds, to combine
> our powers and use them to the limit, to know a little more
> about ourselves and discover within us unknown realities..."

Today that young woman is a lawyer...discovering within her self the unknown realities.

All of us here know the importance of language. All of us love language. But what can we do to get ourselves out of the "cop-out" trap we've been caught in for the last 20 years?

How can we turn education in the language arts around?

How can we teach the basic skills, inspire students to think, to go beyond the information given--to find meaning through language--and still keep our own sanity--to keep from burning out and giving up?

These suggestions are ones you already know--we just have to find the "guts" to put them into place. They are

1. Develop good curriculum and teaching guides...and let the language arts <u>teachers</u> write them.
2. Develop and police a better evaluation program for testing language skills.
3. Use the intensive-emersion model for teaching language.
4. Demand excellence and quit taking mediocrity.
5. Put stiff demands on performance.
6. Work through our teachers' organizations to reduce class size to numbers not ratios.
7. Inform legislators about what we're doing and quit electing those who won't support quality education.
8. Go back to school ourselves. Get universities to teach "on-site" classes with quality instructors.
9. Negotiate professional development for teachers as a part of the benefit package. And insist on <u>quality</u> in-service based on teacher needs.

10. Join professional organizations like this one...and take part in meetings, presentations...read your journals.
11. Put pressure on university and college teacher education programs to quit turning out teachers who are not competent in language themselves, regardless of their content area.
12. Insist that teacher education programs in English and reading teach teachers how to teach the language.
13. Do away with remedial programs which are "baby-sitting" classes and which demand nothing of students.
14. Accept the responsibility for teaching the remedial students ourselves in the regular classroom where it belongs...
15. Use the Socratic method of teaching by questioning. Expect students to read great philosphers, great poets, writers with great ideas...and to discuss those ideas.

And finally, we have to say...legislative mandate won't do it...minimum competency testing is not enough. Only we can make a difference in our own classrooms, in our schools, in our schools districts, and with our state legislators.

Every time I get complacent and tired and burned out, I think of David who sat in my class in the sixties.....

David

Multi-faceted

with light shining through on good days.

Cloudy, dark, brooding on others--

Your face a storm of emotions--

Threatening and grim,

David

A prism of joy on days I read aloud a poem you liked,

or touched your shoulder as I moved near you in the classroom,

Violent, shouting, angry when you couldn't get the answer

Or have my undivided attention.

David

Flashes of brillance when you discussed "Dandelion Wine"

Stopping by my desk to ask, "Shall I die young, too?"

You brought me a pot you threw

And the self-portrait you painted to celebrate your graduation.

Whispering, "Mrs. H., I love you because you're tough

and you helped me learn."

David--

Multi-faceted, gifted prism of life and light in my classroom,

You were gone--but the letters came from college--

Rebellious, protesting the wrongs of war--

Questioning, miserable--Where did we fail you David.

Today as I sat at my desk the message came,

"David died-he left a note for you."

Multi-faceted prism of joy, shattered into a million pieces,

Only a shining, sliver of you left to worry my heart

And change my teaching forever.